

ANCIENT SOUTH-WEST CAMPSITES

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Scattered over the floor of the jarrah forest are implements, tools and debris left there by the first inhabitants of the south-west, the Aborigines.

Every person who has worked in the forest, even if only for a month or two, would almost certainly have come across some of these artefacts. However, very few people recognize them for what they really are.

What a pity! For the ability to recognise artefacts in the field not only makes bush work and bush walking more interesting, it can also lead to the discovery of very ancient Aboriginal campsites, and can open the way to other fields of interest, such as anthropology, archaeology and prehistory.

Many of us are fascinated by accounts of the unearthing of early civilization sites and biblical cities by archaeologists, and we are amazed at the information scientists are able to piece together from the material dug from such places. Yet here in the south-west we unknowingly walk over Aboriginal campsites, some of which were already thousands of years old when Moses received the Commandments, or before the pyramids of Egypt were built.

Because we are ignorant of the existence of these old sites we have unknowingly destroyed many of them, and so disturbed others that much of the information which archaeologists could have won from them has been lost for ever. Future generations will not thank us for this, and neither do today's archaeologists.

An example of this unwitting vandalism is a campsite near Kirup. There is still sufficient material on this site to show that it was a well-used camping place, and judging by some of the material present, it was probably a very old one. Some years ago, when the South-West Highway was being sealed, sand was taken from this spot to cover the wet tar, and of course with the sand went most of the campsite, its artefacts, all chance of learning how long it had been there and most other information this site might have held.

Until about five years ago there had been no archaeological work done in the south-west, but in the last few years, groups from the Museum and the University have made important discoveries in and around the Metropolitan area and at Boranup and Northcliffe. The site at Boranup has been dated at over 24,000 years, and the excavation has not yet been completed. This is one of the oldest dates obtained in Australia for the presence of man.

An amateur, Mr George Gardiner of Northcliffe, has discovered many sites along the south coast, especially around Northcliffe and Windy Harbour. One of these was recently dated at 6,700 years. Geometric microliths found on this site were 1,500 years older than any previously found in Australia.

I have found about a dozen campsites altogether - four between Kirup and Mullalyup and others near Donnybrook, Wilga, Hester, Cudinup and Nannup. All of these have been on disturbed ground - sandpits, road and railway cuttings, damsites and other clearings. Nearly all are on sandy soil near water, or where water is obtainable a metre or so below ground level.

Campsites are not difficult to recognise. On each site are numerous small pieces of stone; usually more than one variety will be present. In the hills, quartz was the stone most commonly used, but nearer the coast, especially if the site is an old one, chert will most often predominate. The fact that some or all types of stone present are alien to the site helps in determining whether or not the material was brought there by man. Usually, if you walk a few metres away you will find no trace of the varieties of stone found on the site, even though the soil type is unchanged.

On the ironstone ridges and gravelly slopes, small scatters of quartz chips and flakes are common. These usually mark a one-night camp, or where a man has paused long enough to fashion a new artefact. The chips and flakes are waste material left in making an implement from a larger piece. Also found on the ridges, though less frequently, are larger pieces of igneous rock shaped into choppers, scrapers or grinding stones. These are easily identified as man-made articles, even though they may be very crudely made, because they so obviously do not belong naturally where they are, and therefore must have been left there by man.

These artefacts are of little or no commercial value, but an undisturbed campsite might be of great scientific value. Destroying a campsite is like burning a valuable historical document, and disturbing one, or removing material from it, is like tearing pages from that document. Those of us who work in the bush, and so have the best chance of discovering sites, have an obligation to protect this part of Australia's heritage. We can best do that by knowing something about it, and by reporting what we discover to the Museum.

All Aboriginal sites in W.A. are protected by law, and it is illegal to remove any article from one, or in any other way to damage the site. It is also illegal to conceal the discovery of a site. A special section has been established at the Museum for the registration of aboriginal sites, and any discoveries should be reported there.